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THE VILLAGE IN THE NATIONAL LIFE OF LEBANON

Afif I. Tannous

369 THE MIDDLE EAST reveals itself most fundamentally through a study of its rural society. There is indeed no other road to an authentic understanding of this part of the world. Agriculture is the mainstay of its economy; it also holds the greatest promise for widespread economic development. Of even greater importance, however, is the human factor: between 70 and 80 percent of the people of the Middle East are rural, depending upon agriculture for a living. By sheer numbers, if nothing else, these masses of the population would constitute the substance of national character. But more than that, they have a distinctive culture of their own which has determined the wide base upon which national life must develop. That this basic stratum of Middle East society is inarticulate and has been ignored for long centuries does not alter its fundamental significance.

369 The rural society of the Middle East consists of two major segments — the pastoral tribe and the agricultural village — which supplement and merge into each other, economically, biologically, and culturally. In some countries of the area, for example Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, the nomadic or semi-settled tribe plays a significant role.[1] In others, such as

113 [1] Afif I. Tannous, "The Arab Tribal Community in a Nationalist State," *Middle East Journal*, I (1947), 5-17.

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114 v AFIF I. TANNOUS, Lecturer at The Middle East Institute on the cultural organization of the Arab peoples, is regional specialist in charge of the Middle East Section, Office of Foreign Agricultural Relations, Department of Agriculture. The discussion here presented is developed from a chapter by the author in the *Report* of the United States — Lebanon Agricultural Mission, of which he was a member.

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Egypt, Turkey, and Lebanon, it is the agricultural village that is paramount. The Lebanese, it is true, are generally known abroad as a trading people, whose ships have sailed throughout the Mediterranean world since ancient times. But this urban, merchant community has always been backed by the rural community of the Mountain.

In few other countries do we find the village-community type of human settlement so firmly established and so influential in the development of national life as in Lebanon. The village has existed continuously there since ancient times. Despite great upheavals, the farmer of Lebanon has patiently and persistently cultivated the soil, produced his crops, and raised his livestock. He has found in the rugged mountains a refuge from persecution and oppression. He has adapted himself efficiently to the difficult terrain, blasting the rocks and terracing the steep slopes in order to make room for his trees, vines, and grains. Over many centuries of adjustment to his peculiar physical and societal environment, he has succeeded in developing a clearly defined and firmly established way of life. He stands at present as the main pillar of national life in the mountains of Lebanon, the embodiment of a long and rich cultural heritage.

In appraising the significance of the village community in the life of present-day Lebanon, one can readily point out three major contributions. The first of these is biological: the replenishment and revitalization of the population in general, and of the urban population in particular. A study of the development of Lebanon over the past half century reveals clearly that rural areas have been mainly responsible for the building up of the flourishing urban or partly urban centers of Sidon, Beirut, Tripoli, and Zahleh. They have maintained a high birth rate, true to the trend prevailing in all rural areas of the Middle East. Due to a healthful climate and relatively high standards of sanitation, infant mortality has been lower in Lebanon than in the other countries of the Middle East. The result has been a constant stream of vigorous emigrants leaving the villages for urban centers.

Some fifty years ago this population overflow produced such pressure on the limited land and technological resources of

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Lebanon that it could no longer be absorbed within the country. The village folk had the choice of submitting to a life of poverty or of emigrating abroad, seeking new opportunities and fortunes. The first alternative was incompatible with their cultural heritage. They were mostly independent farm owners, not share croppers, and were animated by a comparatively high degree of learning; they were exposed to influences of the West; and they had a long history of struggle against great odds, demanding initiative and enterprise on the part of the individual and the group.

Consequently, they resorted to emigration for relief. Some sought opportunities in the urban centers of neighboring Arab countries. They established themselves there as merchants, teachers, publishers, doctors, and as government officials in various capacities. Most of them, however, turned toward the promising New World, north and south. It is estimated that these emigrants, together with the families they have reared, now exceed in number the population resident in Lebanon itself.

Recent estimates put the population of Lebanon at 1.2 million, of whom about 75 percent are rural. There seems to be no slackening in the high rate of increase. The density of population, one of the highest in the world, amounts to about 300 per square mile of total area, and 1,800 per square mile of cultivated area. In the Middle East it is exceeded only by Egypt, which holds the world record with a density of about 2,000 per square mile of cultivated area.

This biological resource of the village community constitutes both a serious problem and a challenge to Lebanon. Emigration possibilities for the surplus population are no longer as readily available as they were prior to a decade or two ago. A realistic, long-range solution lies in the application of an enlightened population policy and developmental program that would result in controlled growth on the one hand, and in the efficient development of the country's natural resources on the other.

The second major contribution of the village community to the country is economic. This is readily apparent and needs little elaboration. Dwellers in the villages are the farming folk of Lebanon. Their agricultural activity is the mainstay of the

national economy. They produce most of the food consumed by the country, as well as raw materials for industries and some surplus products for export. In fact, agricultural items are Lebanon's principal exports. Agriculture is also destined to play an even greater role in the future. At present the area under

area under irrigation. The crop land can at least be doubled, mainly by means of expanded irrigation. The abundant water resources could be much more efficiently utilized than it now is for increasing crop production, for the generation of power, and for household uses. There are good possibilities for the development of such agricultural and cottage industries as canning, dairying, cold storage for fruit, tanning, and handicrafts. Furthermore, production can be materially increased by the application of improved methods of cultivation. In other words, the village folk of Lebanon are in a position to make an even greater contribution to the national economy than they now do, provided they are given the necessary technical training and expert guidance.

In the third place, the rural community has been a main contributor to the cultural development of Lebanon. By culture here is not meant the conventional fine arts or those items of refinement in behavior that are shared by the few. We mean rather the pattern of living that is characteristic of Lebanon as a whole. We find here certain distinctive features, many of which can be traced directly to their origin in the village community. It is true that cultural influences from abroad have been finding their way into urban centers and thence into rural areas. These influences, however, together with those that have originated in urban centers, have not superseded the main body of culture, which remains predominantly rural. Family solidarity, group loyalty, individual initiative and enterprise, co-operativeness, community consciousness, a democratic way of living involving basic equality, and folk poetry are outstanding examples.

Finally, mention should be made of the significant leadership, in the various walks of life, that has been produced by the Lebanese village. The majority of leaders in politics, education, medicine, law, business enterprise, literature, and the other pro-

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business, although they flourish in urban centers, have either had a direct rural upbringing or are but one generation removed from it.

II

Typically the peasants in Lebanon live in villages, not on isolated farmsteads. This is the prevailing pattern of the Middle East and of most the Old World. In some parts of Europe and in most of the United States farmers live in relative isolation, each on his own land. These two different patterns have contributed to marked differences in the way of life among farming folk.

The typical Lebanese farming settlement consists, in the first place, of the village proper. This is a conglomeration of dwellings concentrated in a relatively small area. The houses, ranging in number from about 100 to 500, stand close to one another. Sometimes there is room between them for small gardens or orchards. Usually the center of this nucleated structure is the church or the mosque. In the adjoining open space, the *sahe*, the people assemble to celebrate, exchange news, or hold a market. Dwellings stretch from this center in various directions. Usually, sections of the village are differentiated along kinship-group lines. Another important center is the well, or spring, in the village proper or just outside it. Agricultural land, consisting mainly of orchards, vineyards, and open fields, extends in all directions from the central group of dwellings. During the greater part of the year, the farmers and their animals take a daily trip, going to the fields early in the morning and returning to the village at sunset.

The outstanding feature of this type of close settlement is that it provides the individual with a situation that is highly socializing. People know one another intimately. In many important situations they act as a group, yet leave room for individual initiative. A genuine feeling of neighborliness, or *jiwar*, prevails. The Arabic term is significant, properly meaning "help" or "cooperation." A child growing up in such a milieu must learn from his early days how to rub elbows with people and get along with them. He must develop the art of adjustment not only to his age group but also to his elders and those younger than himself.

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He soon develops a keen consciousness of belonging to the community. Through such consciousness his personality is expanded. The attainment of his life's objectives is tempered by a firmly established sense of responsibility as a member of the group.

It is in such surroundings that a spirit of true democracy is nurtured and developed. Viewed from this angle, the village community of Lebanon assumes a new national significance.

From the economic viewpoint, this type of physical structure has resulted in the development of a widespread problem of fragmented holdings. The Lebanese farmer frequently owns property that consists of some 10, 15, or 20 small plots, scattered in all directions from the village where he lives. Agriculturally, this type of landholding is inefficient. The farmer wastes much time and energy in walking from plot to plot. Furthermore, he cannot develop a satisfactory over-all plan of management for his land. A national plan for the consolidation of holdings, launched on a voluntary co-operative basis, thus is in order. Consolidation alone, however, would be only a temporary solution, for the prevailing system of dividing the land among the heirs and the practice of selling a small portion of a plot upon need would in time cause the fragmented holdings to reappear. Other complicating factors, some social and some religious, require that the problem be given more detailed study and analysis before a satisfactory solution can be devised.

The Lebanese farmer manifests a deep-rooted attachment to his land. It is his main source of living, and before him it supported a long line of his ancestors. It is an integral part of his being; he speaks of it with religious fervor. The various plots he owns carry personalized names, referring to certain qualities, incidents in village history, ancestors, or patron saints. By virtue of owning them and being a good farmer he is given status in the community and plays a role in its affairs. To sell out and migrate to another locality is abhorrent to him, a threat to his whole existence. When he is forced to emigrate abroad, he does so with the fervent hope that some day he will return to his village community, to the land that ties him in an organic manner to a long line of ancestors. If he is forced to mortgage or sell some of his land upon departure, his first concern is to remit money to pay

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off the mortgage or to reacquire the land sold. At present there are many among the old emigrants who refuse to sell the land they own back home, although they have lost the hope of ever returning to live there.

This attachment to the land and to the community life that has developed on it is one of the fundamentals of national existence. It contributes essential stability and continuity to national character, especially in times of crisis and change. There are, however, factors such as a faulty land-tenure system, lack of adequate credit facilities, and absentee landownership that have been threatening this basis of security in village life. Although most of the land in Lebanon is privately owned, held in fee simple either by the individual farmer or by the joint family group, in certain sections of the country, mostly outside the central mountain region, share cropping prevails. There is no doubt that this condition, associated in many cases with absentee ownership, has retarded agricultural development and resulted in an appreciable lower standard of living, especially in many of the villages of the Akkar plain and the Bika' valley.

Religious experience is another outstanding feature in the life of the rural folk of Lebanon. They take their religious organization, Christian or Moslem, seriously. Like their land and their agricultural activity, it constitutes a major part of their existence. Religion is not confined to formal services at the church or the mosque. It is expressed in wholesome recreation that takes place in connection with various festivals honoring patron saints. The Arabic word for festival, *'id*, is the symbol of a rich cultural complex indicating joy, relaxation, sociability, and religious fervor. When the farmer refers to his land, crops, or animals, he invokes Allah's name and blessing. On certain occasions some of the season's produce is carried to the church to be blessed. The normal greeting between farmers at work is not "Good morning" or "Good evening," but rather "May Allah give you health and strength."

Furthermore, there is a striking identification of the religious organization with the local community. It is the people of the village who donate the land and erect the church or mosque building. The priest or imam is a member of the village, chosen

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by the people, and ordained by higher religious authorities. Through unspecified donations, members of the community meet his needs. In some cases, he does not even cease to be an active farmer. A balance is established between the central religious organization of the country and the village church through respect for local autonomy.

Another pillar of life among the rural people of Lebanon is the family organization, which is characterized by three functional units or stages. The first of these is the primary biological unit, consisting of the married couple and their children. The second is a more comprehensive unit, known as the joint family, which consists of the grandparents at the head, their unmarried daughters, and the various families of their sons. At a certain point in its growth, this joint family breaks up into new units, resulting ultimately in the development of the largest family organization, the kinship group. Members of this group claim descent from the same ancestor and normally carry his name.

Evidences of the importance of the family organization are numerous and convincing. A village consists actually of a community of people held together to a large extent by blood ties, either through descent within the kinship group or through intermarriage between these units. Practically everybody is related directly or indirectly to everybody else. A strong sense of belonging and of solidarity develops as a result. Marriage, to a large extent, is a family affair, with emphasis upon the interests and welfare of the two family groups concerned. Children are usually named after ancestors or other relatives, thus emphasizing the blood tie. Land is normally held and operated jointly by various members of the unit. Loyalty to the family in times of crisis is binding; family honor and prestige must be upheld.

In their use of proverbs, expressing fundamental attitudes, the village folk frequently refer to this family relationship. "Blood can never turn into water." "A boy is two-thirds the image of his uncle." "Marry the daughter of a good family, though she be an old maid." "He who has no family backing has no backbone." These are but a few examples. Further evidence of the identification of the individual with the family group is supplied by the manner in which people are addressed or introduced.

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Parents, after the birth of their first son, cease to be addressed by their given names. They are now addressed by the name of their son, as the father or the mother of so-and-so. On the other hand, the members of the younger generation, until they are married, are referred to and introduced as the children of so-and-so, of such-and-such a family.

An outstanding characteristic of this rural family organization is that, with minor exceptions in certain parts of Lebanon, the woman occupies a relatively high status. Moslem or Christian, she does not submit to the veil, nor does she suffer from undue segregation. In the majority of cases, boys and girls attend the same village school. Whenever both men and women do farm work, we find, as a general rule, that division of labor prevails, with the lighter tasks assigned to women. In many villages of the mountain region, an increasing proportion of women do not do any farm work at all, applying themselves completely to homemaking. Some fifty years ago the doors of higher education were opened to the village women of Lebanon. Since then they have played an increasingly important role in national leadership and development as teachers, writers, doctors, lawyers, and enlightened homemakers.

Recreational activity, to one degree or another, is characteristic of many rural societies. This seems to be an essential need, biologically and socially, of human group life. By this means the group gives spontaneous expression, in symbolic form, to the fundamental values of its life and to its aspirations. The rural society of Lebanon is outstanding in this respect, having developed a rich recreational heritage that is well known in the Arabic-speaking world. Some aspects of this heritage have been carried to, and kept alive in, foreign countries by Lebanese emigrants. The Lebanese farmer is characterized by a well-developed sense of humor and a lively tendency to indulge in pranks. He loves to compose folk poetry and sing folk songs, when alone working in his fields or when in the company of friends. From his early childhood he learns to be a good folk dancer. At the same time his community life is characterized by an abundance of recreational expression.

Occasions for community festivities and group-play activity

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are numerous and varied. A large number of these are related to the religious life of the community. In addition to the regular weekly holiday and other general holidays of the Christians or Moslems, there are several community festivals held in honor of particular patron saints. Each of these festivals is an occasion for people of several villages to get together and celebrate, sometimes for two or three days at a time. They visit, trade, compete in games, compose folk poetry, participate in religious chanting or group singing, and dance the well-known folk dance, the *dabki*.

In a similar manner the people celebrate the harvesting of some of their crops. Also in the *sahra* they have a well-developed recreational institution: an evening get-together at one of the homes to visit, play games, or listen to a story being read or told. At the time of a wedding or a funeral, practically the whole community, old and young, halts its routine activities and participates in the affair. Here again the group manifests its solidarity and takes a new hold on life by expanding its happiness in the first case, and by lightening the burden of its sorrows in the second.

The village community of Lebanon is thus essentially a co-operative unit: in its family organization, in its traditions of neighborliness, in its religious institutions and social life, in its educational efforts. Co-operation, in one degree or another, is also involved in many agricultural activities such as the threshing of grain, the sharing of draft animals, and the assigning of water rights.

One can readily see in this a promising and secure foundation on which to establish a successful organization of agricultural co-operatives according to modern principles and techniques. In fact, a beginning has already been made along this line. In 1944 the Lebanese Government passed a decree providing for the establishment of a co-operative council, whose function is to guide and supervise the projected movement. The decree also covers various essential details of organization, obligations and rights of members, audit and inspection, and voting procedure.

The successful co-operative experiment of Abadiyeh village, in the mountains above Beirut, provides a striking demonstration of the manner in which such a developmental scheme can

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be successfully grafted upon the traditional community spirit and yield fruit. This society was started by a rural leader of the country, a native of the village, under the auspices of the American University of Beirut and the Near East Foundation of New York. It has been functioning continuously and successfully for more than ten years, a modern co-operative enterprise flourishing on the foundations of the traditional mutual aid of the village community.

Emphasis has been made upon two great needs in Lebanese agriculture — extension of credit at reasonable rates for productive purposes, and efficient marketing of produce. In both respects the Abadiyeh people have been amply rewarded. Over 300 of them belong to the society, representing, as heads of families, the great majority of the total population. The bulk of the surplus of grapes, the major crop of the village, amounting to over 1,000 tons, is marketed through the co-operative. With efficient packing and guaranteed grading, it brings higher prices in Beirut markets than others less carefully prepared. Loans to members have steadily increased. The farmers have been educated to borrow only for productive purposes, at a low rate of interest, and to pay back on time. They have also learned how to apply some of the profits to public services. Three or four other villages have already followed the example of Abadiyeh.

If given the encouragement and guidance that is initially necessary, the co-operative will find an unusually fertile soil for rapid growth in the rural society of Lebanon. Not only the problems of credit and marketing, but also those of increased crop production, livestock improvement, and procurement of supplies could be solved to a large extent by this form of organization. More important still, the co-operative society could develop ultimately into the integrating and dynamic center of village life.

III

Some fifty years ago, significant changes began to take place in the life of the Lebanese rural community. The main factors involved have been large-scale emigration to foreign countries; rapid development of elementary and higher education, mostly under the influence of Western agencies; expanded trade and

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other business activities with the West; modern technology and means of communication; and, finally, the rise of political consciousness, culminating recently in national emancipation.

Each of these factors for change has been potent, introducing far-reaching influences in the life of the people. The educational movement has brought a rate of literacy, estimated at 70 percent, which is unequalled in any other rural area of the Middle East. The rate is even higher for the more advanced mountain region considered separately from the coastal and urban areas of Lebanon. Here we find a school in practically every village, catering to the needs of both boys and girls. From the elementary schools, village youth has flowed in increasing numbers to high schools and colleges. As a result, the horizon of the village has been widened intellectually and economically, causing the farming folk to question their way of life and to seek greater opportunities in the outside world.

As mentioned before, Lebanese emigrants, mostly from the rural areas, left in relatively large numbers to the Americas and other parts of the world. Practically every farm-family unit has one or more of its members residing abroad. Through correspondence, the press, and literature, through clubs and societies, through visits back home, and by means of the substantial sums of money sent to their families, these emigrants have contributed heavily to the widening of the village horizon and to the changing of its pattern.

Perhaps the most potent factor for change in the village at present is its politico-national awakening. This factor carries with it great possibilities for rural development, as well as grave dangers for its way of life. National consciousness at present permeates rural life in Lebanon. At the same time, practically every village community has been actively reached by one or more of several political ideologies. Rural people have begun to identify themselves with greater national and international entities.

The village community of Lebanon is now going through a stage of rapid transition and difficult adjustment. Its traditional organization, with its institutional pillars of family, land, and religion, is being severely challenged. New ways of doing things

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and new forms of human relationships are competing, and in many cases conflicting with the old folkways and mores. In some villages one can witness indications of severe disorganization. This state of affairs might be considered as an index of health and growth. It might, on the other hand, result in much disruption and cultural loss. Only tentative and partial experiments have been made to date in working out a progressive pattern for village life, as in the co-operative movement described above. This is a serious matter for Lebanon to consider, for its future development depends to a large extent upon the success with which its village communities adjust to the changing times without abandoning the fundamental role they have played in shaping Lebanon's national character.